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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1581
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 1536
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1537
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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN: WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY EVENTS

REF: A) STATE 68819 B) DUSHANBE 0704

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11. SUMMARY: Embassy Dushanbe marked World Press Freedom Day with an on-line press conference with the Ambassador answering questions from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia. The Ambassador also participated in a World Press Freedom Day roundtable hosted by Internews, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, and the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan at the President's Strategic Research Center. Despite ever increasing pressure from Russia to control Western influence in Tajikistan, these two events indicate Tajikistan continues its balancing act. For Avesta, with some ties to the government, to give the Ambassador a platform to answer questions from not only Tajikistan but also from the CIS, has to be seen as a plus. Even more interesting is that the President's think tank hosted a free-wheeling roundtable that included U.S. and other pro-democracy NGOs, as well as an implacable opposition figure. We continue to believe these kinds of government-approved events represent a lively debate within the government between the old-guard neo-Soviets and the reformers who have a much broader view of the modern world. It's easy to focus on negative headlines, but we need to remain realistic optimists and stay the course to promote transformational diplomacy. END SUMMARY

12. The Ambassador participated May 2 in a first for Tajikistan, an international on-line press conference. Avesta News Agency, independent but with links to the government, hosted and moderated the event. During two hours on-line, the Ambassador answered numerous questions regarding freedom of the press in the United States and Tajikistan, as well as other policy issues in Tajikistan and the region.

13. The Reporters without Borders ranking of the U.S. press

freedom at 44 in the world, down from 24 the previous year (largely because of the jailing of Judith Miller of the "New York Times," generated questions on whether that ranking represented the true state of media freedom in the United States. U.S. funding for media NGOs raised other questions, one asking why the U.S. government did not view this as interference in a country's internal affairs. The Ambassador noted that support for responsible, independent media helps build civil society, which is a requirement for a democratic state, which President Rahmonov himself has said is his goal.

¶4. Other questions asked the Ambassador's opinion about an inflammatory Moscow-based Tajik opposition newspaper, his views on developments in Uzbekistan (which by diplomatic tradition he declined to answer directly), and his take on various regional web sites, including the controversial

¶5. The full transcript of the press conference will be published in Avesta's new local newspaper, and is available in Russian language at <http://sngnews.ru/conference/info/6.html>.

AMBASSADOR ENCOURAGES GREATER MEDIA INDEPENDENCE

¶6. On May 3, the Ambassador participated in a media roundtable with journalists, publishers, government officials, political scientists, and civil-society representatives at the World Press Freedom Day roundtable organized by Internews, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, and the National Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan at the President's Strategic Research Center.

¶7. As the only keynote speaker (a senior government representative from the President's office was scheduled to speak but passed the buck to one of his subordinates who had a "family emergency"), the Ambassador congratulated Tajikistan's journalists for their efforts to bring to light issues ranging

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from corruption to trafficking in persons to labor migration, and praised the Tajik journalists' hard work towards creating a more independent and responsible press in Tajikistan. He also reminded the audience that Tajikistan has further to go to create a free environment where journalists can work without fear of harassment, intimidation, or retribution.

¶8. Several journalists challenged the Ambassador's view that the press is relatively free in Tajikistan. In reply, he pointed to the various lively political points of view that appear in print, and re-emphasized that the press is "relatively" free. The journalists persisted and asked if the Ambassador was unaware of "government advice to the media" and "paid for articles," as well as occasional direct censorship. He responded that he is well aware of these negatives, and regrets them, but views these as problems to overcome, not reasons for condemnation.

¶9. The Ambassador pointed out that a presidential election year means Tajikistan has a significant opportunity to show its citizens and the world it is committed to the highest international standards of freedom of the media. He called for equal and fair access to the media for all presidential candidates as a vital part of an election process that would meet international standards.

¶10. In a year when the international community will be watching particularly closely, it would be opportune, the Ambassador proposed, for the government to register a national, independent television station. He noted, without naming it (in fact, it is Asia-Plus), that one media organization has had such a request for registration pending for over two years, which is much, much too long, knowing that a transcript of anything he says in public reaches the President and the Ministry of Security. He called on the government to act favorably on this request. The Ambassador further stressed the importance of making the registration process transparent for all media organizations.

A RANGE OF VIEWS AND A LOT OF COOKS IN THE KITCHEN

¶11. The ensuing discussion during the roundtable demonstrated a truly free exchange of clashing points of view. Some journalists, political scientists, and NGOs criticized the government's refusal to register newspapers and other media outlets (except those it approves of), as well as its censorship and pressure on journalists. One political scientist pointed out that by developing strong independent mass media the government can actually strengthen itself.

¶12. Rajab Mirzo, opposition gadfly and political hothead, former editor of the banned "Ruzi Nav" newspaper that saw as its raison d'etre to attack and overthrow President Rahmonov, posed a series of ironic questions that boiled down to, "If it can happen to me, it can happen to you. Stop trying to cooperate!"

¶13. The head of the Republican Bureau for Human Rights called for journalists to unite. A journalist from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty called on journalists themselves to promote their own rights and freedoms, instead of relying on the U.S. Ambassador or international organizations to intervene with the government to build democracy.

¶14. An elderly journalist attached to President Rahmonov's office called for a new journalists' union. (COMMENT: The current journalists' union was recently suspended, probably for good, which is no great loss, since it was an old Soviet-dinosaur of an organization that the younger generation ignored. See ref B. END COMMENT). The official also reminded the roundtable that "professionalism" in journalism means that journalists should first respect the law. "If you

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understand and follow the law, you won't have trouble."

¶15. A businessman who owns a number of newspapers said that journalists should not be revolutionaries. Journalism is a business, and independent media have to be profitable to continue to exist. He said that journalists should be like good cooks. When cooking "plov," Tajikistan's national rice pilaf, they should know how to add the right amount of water and not let the pot boil over. The businessman suggested journalists need to understand the limits of their freedoms, and should not unnecessarily stir up conflict for conflict's sake or for egotistic satisfaction. Another participant pointed out covering conflicting views could be dangerous because reporters cannot be objective when they have their own hot opinions. "They must express themselves!" Another questioned, "What will we get from freedom? We will simply abuse each other. Restrictions keep us straight." (COMMENT: In this view, personal responsibility does not exist. Instead, the paternalistic state keeps everyone in line with its rules and punishments. END COMMENT.)

¶16. The articulate Tajik representative of the Open Society Institute (OSI) lamented that Tajik journalists seldom take advantage of free training seminars in Dushanbe, and places regularly go begging. But when OSI announces opportunities for training programs abroad, it is swamped with applications, she noted.

¶17. COMMENT: Tajikistan teeters on the high wire of "benign authoritarianism," and free and independent media are one of the tipping points. Despite ever increasing pressure from Russia to control -- and, ideally, eliminate -- Western influence in Tajikistan, these two events indicate Tajikistan continues its balancing act. For Avesta, with some ties to the government, to give the Ambassador a platform to answer questions from not only Tajikistan but also from the CIS, including Moscow, has to be seen as a plus. Even more interesting is that the President's think tank hosted a free-wheeling roundtable that included prominently U.S. and other pro-democracy NGOs, as well as opposition figures like Rajab Mirzo. The fist is clenched on the one side, but it continues to stroke on the other. We

continue to believe this represents a lively debate within the government between the old-guard neo-Soviets and the reformers who have a much broader view of the modern world. It's easy to focus on negative headlines, but we need to remain realistic optimists. END COMMENT.
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